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THE PERIS

By Charles C. Curran

Courtesy Noyes, Platt & Co.

## ALIEN ELEMENT IN AMERICAN ART \*

The American art exhibit at the Paris Exposition has been much vaunted, and justly, as a magnificent witness of American talent, and as a prophecy of the position America will soon take in the world's art. Beautifully installed, second in extent only to that of France itself, and containing many works that merit the name of masterpieces, it has attracted the attention and commanded the praise even of critics who are prone to depreciate the results of American effort.

And yet this tribute of praise should be accepted with a grain of allowance by every one who has at heart the best interests of American art. Despite the extent and excellence of the exhibit, there remains the somewhat depressing fact that its works in the main are not national, do not exemplify American spirit or reflect American life.

This is more conspicuous in respect to the American exhibit than to any other at the exposition. The French section is distinctively French, both in spirit and in theme. The same is true in almost as marked a measure of the sections of Belgium, Spain, Holland, Portugal, Italy, Norway, Denmark, Germany, Switzerland, Russia, and Great Britain. This is not saying, of course, that many of the artists represented in these sections have not undertaken to interpret and depict scenes and peoples foreign to their countries. They have. It

\* All the illustrations in this article are from the Official Catalogue of the United States Fine Arts Exhibit, copyright 1900, and published by Noyes, Platt & Co., Boston.

is true, however, that the English and continental sections of the exposition are not open to the same sweeping criticism of un-national ubiquity as the American.

The Director-General of the Paris Exposition of 1889 said in his official report on the Fine Arts Exhibition: "The United States section was but a brilliant annex to the French section. . . .

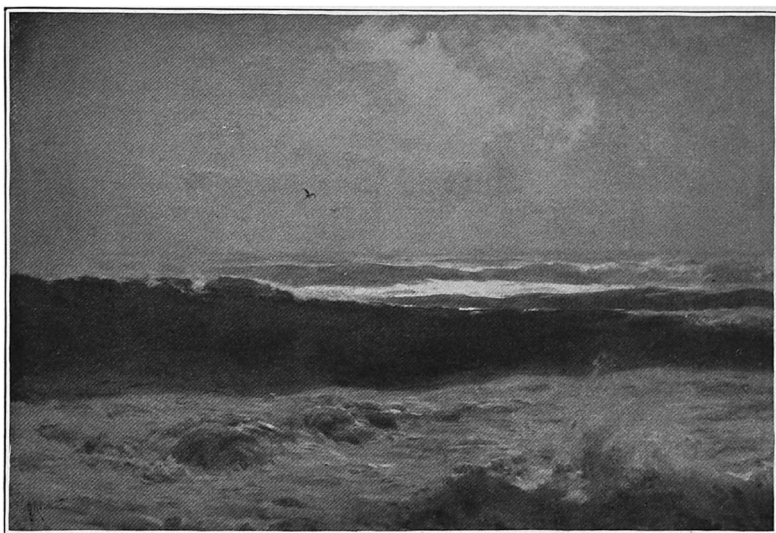


THE CLOUDED SUN  
By George Inness  
Courtesy Noyes, Platt & Co.

The ambition of the American artists evidently is to interpret the world of to-day; but they have come to us to get their method of expression. . . . It would be difficult to mention many men who do not draw their inspiration directly from French masters." These words expressed a just criticism, with the rankling sting of merited sarcasm. The American exhibit of 1900 is better, as a whole, than that of 1889, but it is no less un-American, no less untrue to national ideals and national temperament.

The cause of this fault is not far to seek. American artists go to Europe, and especially to Paris, to complete their education, and are apparently not strong enough to resist the dominating influence of their masters in after-work. Too often, moreover, captivated by the spirit of European capitals or charmed by the more congenial art circles of the old world, they virtually expatriate themselves.

Of the painters, etchers, and sculptors upon whom the present exposition has conferred medals, eight are self-confessed exiles—Sargent, Whistler, Abbey, Alexander, Pennell, Saint Gaudens, MacMonnies, and Brooks. Of the gross number of artists exhibiting in the American section, seventy-five have taken up a European residence and for indefinite periods or for good have become alien to



CLEARING

By Howard Russell Butler

Courtesy Noyes, Platt & Co.

home and home inspiration. Dropped into a foreign environment and brought daily under the influence of foreign models and masters, it is not a matter of wonderment that their art should gradually acquire a foreign impress and drift rapidly away from national standards and subjects, that American art should become little more than French art with American trimmings.

A national art is not the mere vague vamping of country-tied enthusiasm. Be it in figure painting or in landscape, it is the prerequisite of the highest attainments. It has been said, and with truth, that the Alps and the Rhine never made a great painter. They have furnished striking pictures, pictures that have captivated the multitude. But the multitude have seen in the pictures, not high art, but mere bits of wonderful scenery, that have pleased by their uniqueness or



THE SORCERESS

By F. S. Church

Courtesy Noyes, Platt &amp; Co.

their association. French landscape painters have admittedly reached the highest degree of perfection, but they have done so not by ransacking the world for striking subjects on which to display their technical ability, but by getting into the closest communion with their native districts and seeking to interpret them by the medium of pigments. The same is true of *genre* painting.

Corot's rank as a landscape painter is admitted, but Corot got the material for all his paintings within a league of Paris. Foreign artists have repeatedly undertaken to paint French peasants, but all have fallen lamentably below Breton and Millet. Many have essayed to paint Holland dikes and windmills and Holland peasants, but the best pictures of Holland types and scenes have been by Dutch artists. These facts of common observation contain a lesson for the American artist—that the man who undertakes to interpret the world has too great a subject for his abilities, that a few home scenes correctly interpreted and depicted in a masterly manner will confer a more enduring fame than a multitude of alien subjects treated falsely or indifferently.

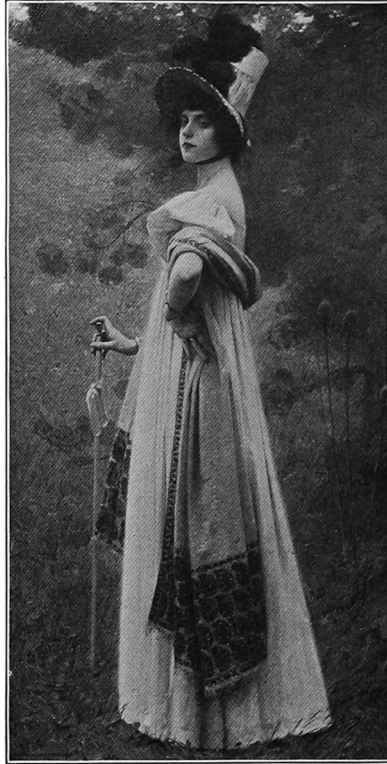
It is not my purpose to institute comparisons or cast reflections. It may be said, however, in general terms, that the pictures in the American exhibit in which Americans may take most pride are those which are most distinctively national. Setting aside mere technical ability, which is largely a matter of time and practice, the paintings most distinctively national are likewise most correctly interpreted.

J. G. Brown, for example, has found a subject not unworthy of his brush in the depiction of American street urchins in "Heels over Head"; Howard Russell Butler and Charles H. Woodbury have interpreted familiar waters and familiar skies in "Clearing" and "A Rock in the Sea"; William A. Coffin and George Inness have been equally loyal to American themes in "Sunrise" and "The Clouded Sun"; Cecilia Beaux and George de Forest Brush, both medalists, have found worthy themes in unlike American types.

Many of the paintings of scenes not distinctively American have high merit, but it is a question if the artists would not have been more successful had they taken subjects with which they were more familiar. Robert Blum, to cite an instance, gives us a pleasing "Flower Market in Tokio," but there are home types of corresponding kind and equal worth with which Mr. Blum is more familiar and in the portrayal of which one suspects he would be more successful; Childe Hassam gives us "A Snowy Day on Fifth Avenue," and one would regret to have a Parisian boulevard in substitute; Julian Storey's "Columbine" is pert and pretty, but distinctively Parisian, but America is replete with subjects equally pert and pretty, with the added charm of a home type; Henry O. Tanner has won plaudits

for his religious paintings, but could he not have found in the struggles of his race, for instance, material worthy of his brush, newer and fresher scenes that he would be more competent to interpret?

This is not meant as invidious criticism. I merely wish to point out the fact that, while no nation in the world has a greater variety of strong, winsome, pathetic, unique types and a wider scope of scenery,



THE SHAWL  
By Charles Sprague Pearce  
Courtesy Noyes, Platt & Co.

ranging from the pleasing to the awe-inspiring, American artists, through fashion or folly, have been prone, under the influence of foreign masters, to slight home types and scenes and ambitiously undertake what they too often, through inexperience, are ill fitted to handle successfully.

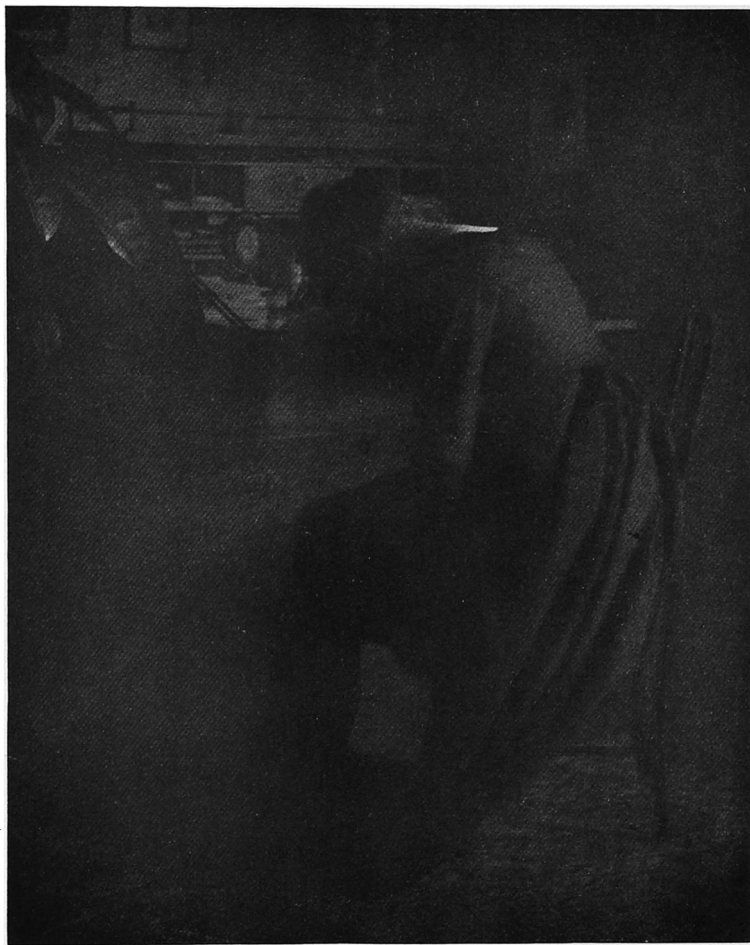


COLUMBINE  
By Julian Story  
Courtesy Noyes, Platt & Co.

A purely imitative art will never be a great art, and the slighting of that with which we are most familiar in deference to that which requires long residence or national temperament thoroughly to appreciate, is folly. In the portrayal of American types American painters have done infinitely less than American black-and-white artists, whose work is commonly regarded as of an inferior class. In faithfully and sympathetically depicting American landscape and in adequately representing our hamlets and our great cities, we have comparatively few masters. We shall have few while it is the fashion to seek inspiration under foreign masters and select subjects under foreign skies.

While I write I look out on a deep ravine of street a mile or more in length, flanked on either side by massive banks of buildings rising to varied heights of ten or fifteen stories. The sun has set in a lurid haze of smoke and cloud; lights flash from a thousand windows

along this artificial defile; strong shadows screen the current of struggling life that surges along its paved bottom. Everything is obscure, gigantic, suggestive of the awe-inspiring, even the terrible, and yet flecked with a certain glow, half genial, half sardonic. It is a sort of commercial Inferno. It reminds one of the wildest imaginative flights of a Doré. No city of the old world offers such possibilities to



BAD NEWS  
By Edmund Stirling  
Salon Picture, 1900



ARTISTIC PHOTOGRAPHY  
Plate Two



an artist who would study its features and feel its influence. This scene—and there are thousands similar in our great cities—is real and near at hand. Yet no artist has caught its spirit or even given a hint on canvas of its strange mingling of solitude and strife, its lights and shadows, its checkered gloom, its mystery; no artist has suggested how it touches the heart, now inspiring it with a sense of indomitable



SPRING PLOWING

By Horatio Walker

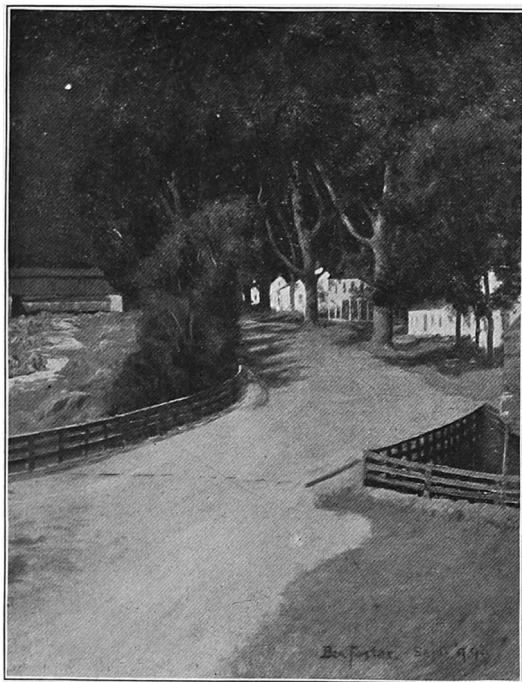
Courtesy Noyes, Platt & Co.

human energy, and again depressing it with anguish akin to what one feels in a wilderness.

Half a mile away, under the same mantle of smoke and shadow and hedged in by similar grim buildings, dimly silhouetted against the night, is a watery gateway of commerce. Piling projects here and there into the stream and great timbers bound together with chains are black and reeking. The far side of the waterway is thick-set with masts. A ponderous swing-bridge creaks and groans and turns, and as its ends leave the buttressed approaches the rush of pedestrians is checked. Street-cars stop on either side and seem to watch with glowing headlights the Titan-like little tug that pulls a great steamer from its slip and heads it for the open water. For a few moments the channel boils, then the bridge again creaks and groans and turns, and the interrupted stream of humanity flows on.

A mere moment in a city's life, a moment worthy of art, but not recorded.

And yet our artists must needs go to London or Paris or Tokio for a street scene, and even Whistler must go to the Thames for a river view. Traditionally, Rome is always stately and dignified; Paris is always gay; Venice is always winsome and watery; and



LULLED BY THE MURMURING STREAM

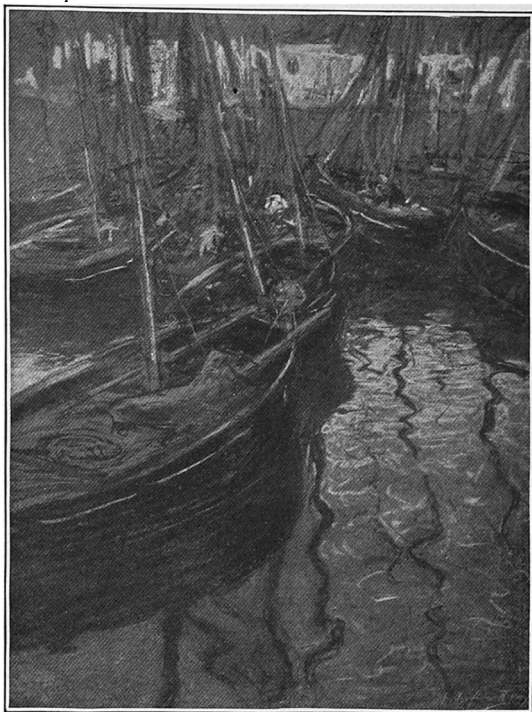
By Ben Foster

Courtesy Noyes, Platt & Co.

London has fogs and fishmongers. They all have their charms, are all replete with inspiration. But if American artists go abroad for instruction, why need they renounce individuality and forswear national aims and aspirations? When Dickens wandered from London byways he was on uncertain ground, and his work showed it; when Scott left his highland hills his imagination afforded no substitute for the lakes and crags in the description of which he excelled; when Hall Caine ventures out of the Isle of Man he gropes like a

novice in an unknown land; even our own word-painter, Hawthorne, was his best in Salem.

And so the American artist, when he renounces home scenes and familiar faces and ambitiously undertakes to interpret the world, courts a danger and jeopardizes his art. He may paint brilliant can-



DISMANTLED BOATS

By Charles H. Fromuth

Courtesy Noyes, Platt & Co.

vases that please for an hour, but in interpreting foreign scenes he must needs look through alien eyes, and his pictures will likely be characterized by lack of sympathy and truth. If he is successful, his success will more than likely be that of the imitator or copyist. In any event, he will be disloyal to types and scenes worthy of the highest art, types and scenes he is qualified by intimate acquaintance and community of life to understand and faithfully portray, and that, in

a hazardous venture in which he is dependent upon half-knowledge or a fleeting impression.

"We possess," said an art critic some years ago, in speaking of the material of American landscape, "all the natural conditions that are necessary to the full fruition of an artistic temperament concerning itself with landscape art. Our sun makes the same kind of



A FLOWER MARKET IN TOKIO

By Robert Blum

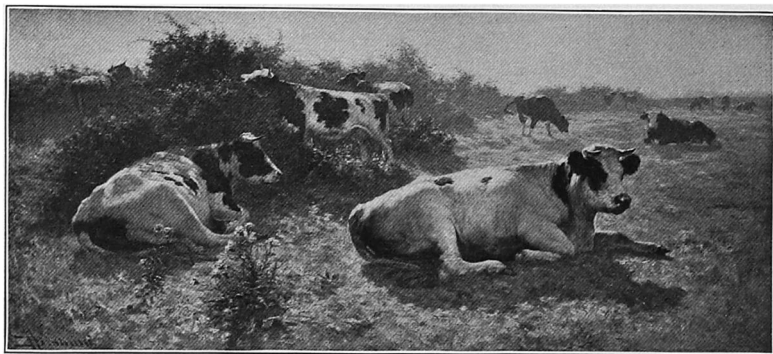
Courtesy Noyes, Platt & Co.

shadows as that of Brittany; the same blue is in our skies and the same cloud-forms; the leafage of our trees is the same, and the water of our ponds and brooks differs in no way from that of France. What we should seek to learn in France is, not how to paint such and such landscapes there, but how to see those landscapes as they appear to and impress the men whose painting of them we admire, and ever after be able to see all other landscapes in the same spirit and fullness of apprehension. One need not go to Brittany to do this. It

can be done at home, and there are men whose work is daily affording ample proof of the fact. But it does not follow therefrom that in the acquisition of the faculty of seeing and feeling the true spirit of *paysage* one is not greatly aided by attrition with the masters of the art and by the study that is had abroad of the precise material of their landscapes. A man who paints for four or five years in Brittany, however, and then in his New York studio can turn out nothing but Brittany landscapes from his sketch-books, has wasted his time and mistaken his vocation."

Extensive, varied, magnificent as is the American art exhibit at Paris, rich as it is in the evidence of personal ability, this, therefore, is its lesson: Expatriation is a mistake, both as regards the future of the individual artist and as regards the future of American art. There has been for years, and will likely continue to be, an annual exodus of artists to Paris and an annual importation of sketch-books crowded with embryo paintings for future elaboration. But this is as flagrant an offense against policy as against taste. Those who are guilty have yet to learn that "there shall be more joy over one honest and sincere American horsepond, over one truthful and dirty tenement, over one unaffected sugar-refinery, over one vulgar but unostentatious coal-wharf, than there shall be over ninety and nine Mosques of St. Sophia, Golden Horns, Normandy Cathedrals, and all the rest of the holy conventionalities and orthodox bosh that have gone to gladden the heart of the auctioneer and deprave American artists."

ELLIS T. CLARKE.



CATTLE

By H. S. Bisbing

Courtesy Noyes, Platt & Co.